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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NOUAKCHOTT 000775

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SUBJECT: REGIME'S "NATIONAL DIALOGUE" BEGINS

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Dennis Hankins for reasons 1.4 (b and d)

11. (C) Summary: The long-awaited National Dialogue on Democracy (Etats Generaux de la Democratie) started December 27 to a full house. President Abdallahi's FNDD party has boycotted the meeting as have several key elements of civil society. Official opposition leader Ahmed Ould Daddah's RFD party decided to participate but with conditions concerning the outcome that may see Ould Daddah disassociate himself from the final outcome. The leadership of the National Dialogue is notable for its lack of notability. While the membership is considered "80% weighted in favor of the High State Council" the Dialogue has reported some frank and diverse discussion in its halls concerning the future political direction of Mauritania albeit with nobody calling for Abdallahi's return. More skeptical participants doubt the dialogue will actually have much impact -- assuming the "results" have already been drafted. The Gaza crisis has made Mauritania's ties to Israel a central element of discussion. End Summary

12. (U) The National Dialogue on Democracy opened December 27 to a packed house of over a thousand delegates. General Aziz started the session with short remarks calling upon delegates to "examine the current political situation and to define the necessary mechanisms to organize democratic and transparent elections." He urged them "to look for the points of weakness in our young democratic system and the gaps that create them in order to adapt our system to our political, social and cultural situation with the goal of avoiding them -- particularly to avoid the derailment at the head of the executive such as we saw with the former regime." Finally, Aziz renewed the engagement of the High State Council to "respect the decisions and recommendations that will come from the consensus of the majority of the participants."

13. (C) The participants in the Dialogue came from the provinces (as chosen by each governor to "fairly represent" the social leaders, parliamentarians, political parties, and civil society. As expected, President Abdallahi's FNDD coalition boycotted the proceedings as did several notable elements of civil society including the bar association, the major trade unions, and Mauritania's leading human rights NGO. Former transition leader Col. Vall was critical of the event and did not participate although a small delegation of loyalists are participating. Opposition leader Ahmed Ould Daddah's RFD party, and Ould Daddah personally, did participate after last week's political wrangling within the

party. Ould Daddah is reportedly managing his delegates from the guest house where President Abdallahi was previously detained to gain one thing out of the process -- the exclusion of any current or former military (i.e. Aziz and Vall) as possible candidates. The expectation is that Ould Daddah will fail in this goal and, ultimately, will disassociate himself from the results.

¶4. (SBU) Some 25 diplomats attended with the German Ambassador drawing the most press. The Spanish were represented by their Charge d'Affaires while the French sent a reporting officer. The Chinese Ambassador attended while the Russian sent their DCM (unclear if the Russians were sending a policy statement since the new Ambassador has not presented credentials). Regional neighbors Morocco (dean of the diplomatic corps), Senegal and Algeria attended but it appears Mali was absent. The U.S. was the only significant mission to send nobody.

¶5. (SBU) The leadership of the Dialogue is made up of relative unknowns. The President of the Dialogue is 72 year old Abdallahi Ould Cheikh who served as a member of the 2005 National Electoral Commission. The dialogue is broken into five main working groups: Group I - Supervision and Oversight of Elections under El Hamdrari Ould Abdessalam; Group II - Scheduling of the Election under Aziz Ould Dahi (Minister of Public Administration under the first Abdallahi government said to be General Aziz' nephew); Group III - Electoral Calendar under Youssouf Diagana; Group IV - Political Institutions under Hamdy Ould Soueiyih; and, Group V - Public Powers under Ahmed Ould Sidi Ahmed (a former

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Foreign Minister under Taya).

¶6. (SBU) The debates are not being broadcast with summaries in the official media being closely controlled. Mission contacts indicate they understand most issues are open for debate with an unwritten rule that (1) the HCE must control the transition and (2) that Aziz needs to be able to run. There has already been some fairly broad debate on issues ranging from the length of the transition (from 6 months to the end of Abdallahi's original mandate in 2012), the criteria for candidates (some saying they must have spent most of the previous 5 years in Mauritania, some saying he must read/write Arabic, some saying he needs to run with a vice-president of another race). A fundamental discussion revolves around whether the powers of the president need to be limited by a stronger parliament.

¶7. (C) Skeptics participating in the Dialogue have indicated to Mission personnel that they assume the "results" are already prepared. Despite the open debate, they note there is no effort to build a common text working from one day's discussion to the next. Given the "majority rules" nature of adopting the Dialogue's final report, they assume the organizers will let the 20% they don't control say whatever they want and then get a majority approval for a document they have prepared from the 80% they do control.

¶8. (C) The Gaza crisis has added an unanticipated element to the dialogue as delegates are quickly seeking planks demanding the cessation of diplomatic relations with Israel. While there have reportedly been some efforts by the regime to turn the conversation towards urging a decision by a future elected president, the timing of the renewed violence puts Aziz in an awkward position particularly given his stated commitment to abide by the decisions of the Dialogue (Comment: The Foreign Ministry confirmed today that Mauritania is still committed to the relationship. End Comment). Baathist and Islamist elements of the President's FNDD coalition have reportedly offered to support the National Dialogue if Aziz cuts relations.

¶9. (C) Comment: The National Dialogue is so far playing out pretty much as expected. The regime managed to pack the

house with the strongest critics staying away. The ever-on-the-fence Ould Daddah finally joined but is already assumed to be ready to renounce the results if he doesn't get what he wants. The internal dialogue seems fairly open except for the fact that it assumes the coup as a fait accompli. International representation gives credibility to the occasion that will undoubtedly be used in an effort to fend off sanctions. The close on the 5th of January will demonstrate whether this is all theater or just a bit of theater -- whether there are any serious policy discussions or not. Clearly, the report will not call for the reversal of the coup and the return of the elected president. End Comment.

HANKINS